

## **Sanjūsangendō's Architecture**

### **Connection between Name and Architecture**

The popular name of “Sanjūsangendō” comes from the building’s physical composition, and simply means “hall with 33 intervals,” referring to the intervals between columns, and suggesting an extremely long structure. The Buddhist resonances in the name are unmistakable. The number 33 derives from a belief that the all-seeing, all-compassionate bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit), can assume 33 different forms to assist sentient beings and guide them to salvation.

When viewed from the outside, however, a close observer might notice that there are 35, not 33, intervals between the thick timber columns of the longer sides of the hall. This is explained by the simple fact that the count of 33 comes from the structure’s interior chamber, excluding the surrounding corridor and eaves. This inner sanctum is where the principal icon is reverently installed, flanked by one thousand bodhisattvas and an additional 30 Indian deities.

### **Original Structure within the Hōjūjidono**

When Sanjūsangendō was originally completed in 1164, it was part of a much larger temple-palace complex called the Hōjūjidono that covered over 14 hectares (about 10 soccer fields) in the Shichijō are between the Kamo River and Kyoto’s eastern hills. Retired Emperor Goshirakawa commissioned the complex to serve as a political, economic, and religious base. After fire destroyed the entire complex in 1249, Sanjūsangendō was one of the few structures to be quickly rebuilt. Although it has

undergone several major restorations over the past 750 years, the building that stands today dates from 1266 and is among the oldest structures in the country.

### **Roof Tiles**

The long, rectangular symmetry of Sanjūsangendō's timber frame stands in stark contrast to the curves of the sloping, tiled roof. The roof tiles are arranged in a pattern that resembles interlocking half-pipes. This configuration was used frequently on the most important temple and palace buildings of the Heian period (794–1185). Each column of interlocking tiles is capped with a circular tile where it comes to an end. These circular tiles form a row along the edges of the eaves and are decorated with various motifs including double lotuses, the *tomoe* design of swirling comma-like shapes, and the crest of the Toyotomi family. Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) financed the partial restoration of Sanjūsangendō in the late sixteenth century. Other pendant tiles are inscribed with the imperial year Keian 3 (1650), the year when yet another restoration took place. Main ridges are decorated with large “demon tiles” that serve to frighten away malevolent spirits.

### **Architectural Structure**

Sanjūsangendō's tile roof was costly to produce and is extremely heavy. To sustain the load, an innovative engineering method that distributes the weight of the roof evenly across a latticework of beams, rafters, and purlins is employed. The interlocking structure of the timberwork gives Sanjūsangendō a structural flexibility that has protected it from destruction by the many earthquakes of the past eight centuries. Originally, these timber supports were colorfully decorated with bright blue, red, and

green pigments. Faint remnants of the original, elaborate lotus and cloud patterns still remain in the dark recesses of the interior attic.

### **Temple Gates**

The Great South Gate (Nandaimon) and the earthen wall that defines the contemporary southern border of the temple were both built by the order of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century. The East Gate, which is near the property's northeastern corner, is of an extremely unusual design found at only a few locations throughout the country.